

## **PRIESTLY NARCISSISM**

**By Patrick Barker**

I can still recall my confusion when narcissism was discussed early in my training in pastoral counseling. The vague image that sprang to mind was of Narcissus seeing himself in a pool of water and falling in love with his reflection. This image did not seem to fit the discussion I was overhearing among the second-year students and the professors. Rather than a person who thought of himself more highly than he ought to think, they were describing a client who thought less of himself than he probably should have.

I eventually learned that the notion most of us have of narcissism is mistaken. While narcissists may give the impression of overflowing with self-confidence and self-esteem, the truth is just the opposite. Narcissists are not full of themselves, as we might think. On the contrary, there is not much of self there to be full of. Narcissism is a defensive strategy of a fragilely integrated self against threats of self-contempt and emptiness. Narcissists depend upon the acclaim of others for a sense of personal wholeness. That they must depend upon others to maintain psychological wholeness helps explain the curious mixture in narcissistic personalities of indifference to the needs of other people with an exquisitely fine-tuned sensitivity to their preferences. The narcissist does not genuinely care for other people; rather he or she uses them for psychic survival.

This is, of course, a matter of degree. If given a choice, most of us would prefer to be liked rather than disliked; and we all need validation by others to be whole. There is no such thing as a self-made individual. We all compose a self in interaction with others, interactions that must include some degree of being prized simply for the persons we are. A person who develops a narcissistic strategy for living has often experienced - through no fault of his or her own - early, repeated and significant deficits in being prized, and so hungers for it. This hunger sometimes leads them into the ministry. When it does, everyone loses.

First, the person himself or herself loses. Their narcissism is often reinforced in the ministry. By virtue of their role in a faith community, priests are in a position to be inordinately prized by the members of the congregation, but not always for being themselves. Priests often encounter approval from the congregation for adequately representing to the congregation a wide range of projected images, some of which are reasonable, some of which are not. In other words, priests are targets of transference, par excellence. Church members often project onto the priest their images and feelings about God, Jesus, the Church, morality, the Bible, spirituality, the American way of life, their parents, grandparents and siblings, and so on. If these images are positive, the narcissistic priest may bask for a time in his or her projected glory (that is, for as long as he or she lives up to the expectations entailed in these images). The hunger for approval is consequently fed, but not satisfied. It is not satisfied because he or she is not getting what is needed. He or she is not being prized for himself or herself, but for what he or she represents for someone else.

As often as not, however, these projected images are not positive, but negative. Then the priest does not get even mediated approval. Rather, he or she repeatedly encounters criticism, eventually drawing the depressing conclusion that it is impossible to please these people. The narcissist believes this failure is his or her fault, which only reinforces the often deep-seated sense of rejection, unworthiness and emptiness that characterizes narcissistic personalities, engendering at times narcissistic rage.

Second, the congregation loses. Christian congregations must occasionally encounter "a sign of contradiction," as Søren Kierkegaard put it in reference to Christ. While congregations may be inclined to favor the priest who tells them what they want to hear, this is not always what they need to hear, nor is it what the priest is there to do. Through preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and so on, the priest proclaims the gospel of Christ to the church. Since this gospel often contradicts culturally shaped

expectations and values, its ministers must do likewise. This is something the narcissist is loathe to do, for it is likely to lead to his or her rejection - at least temporarily - by congregations that (unconsciously perhaps) expect their culturally conditioned sensibilities to be reinforced in church. This rejection, which is difficult in any case, is more than his or her personality can bear. Consequently, he or she will water down the gospel to make it - and himself or herself - more acceptable to the congregation. While this may provide the congregation with momentary edification and comfort, it will not last, and the congregation will not be well served by it.

Finally, from what has been said, it is obvious that the gospel itself is not served by narcissistic priests. The classical New Testament text for this comes from Paul: "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). The gospel simply cannot be served by people whose primary goal in ministry is to win the approval of others. Apart from what this conclusion may say about the ordination process in most dioceses, it clearly suggests that persons whose psychic wholeness depends upon the continuing admiration of others will be hampered in their ministries by this dependence, and are not well suited for a service that entails disagreements and conflicts as a normal aspect of its practice.

Of course, narcissists are not the only ones who would like to avoid disagreements and conflicts; who wouldn't? Nevertheless, that conflicts can be significantly more difficult for narcissists to navigate than for others, and this burden should not be placed on their shoulders - even if they ask for it. And they often do ask for it because the Episcopal priesthood seems to provide narcissists with a unique outlet for their narcissism. This avenue is particularly open to narcissists who happen to be charming, intelligent and socially adept, for nothing pleases an Episcopal crowd so well as do these qualities. Even so, pleasing the crowd is not always good for the crowd, the pleaser or the message.

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MAYO CLINIC – excerpted from "NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER"

Original Article: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/narcissistic-personality-disorder/DS00652>

#### DEFINITION

Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance and a deep need for admiration. They believe that they're superior to others and have little regard for other people's feelings. But behind this mask of ultra-confidence lies a fragile self-esteem, vulnerable to the slightest criticism.

Narcissistic personality disorder is one of several types of personality disorders. Personality disorders are conditions in which people have traits that cause them to feel and behave in socially distressing ways, limiting their ability to function in relationships and in other areas of their life, such as work or school. In particular, narcissistic personality disorder is characterized by dramatic, emotional behavior, in the same category as histrionic, antisocial and borderline personality disorders. Narcissistic personality disorder treatment is centered around psychotherapy.

## **SYMPTOMS**

**Narcissistic personality disorder symptoms may include:**

- ♦ **Believing that you're better than others**
- ♦ **Fantasizing about power, success and attractiveness**
- ♦ **Exaggerating your achievements or talents**
- ♦ **Expecting constant praise and admiration**
- ♦ **Believing that you're special**
- ♦ **Failing to recognize other people's emotions and feelings**
- ♦ **Expecting others to go along with your ideas and plans**
- ♦ **Taking advantage of others**
- ♦ **Expressing disdain for those you feel are inferior**
- ♦ **Being jealous of others**
- ♦ **Believing that others are jealous of you**
- ♦ **Trouble keeping healthy relationships**
- ♦ **Setting unrealistic goals**
- ♦ **Being easily hurt and rejected**
- ♦ **Having a fragile self-esteem**
- ♦ **Appearing as tough-minded or unemotional**

**Although some features of narcissistic personality disorder may seem like having confidence or strong self-esteem, it's not the same. Narcissistic personality disorder crosses the border of healthy confidence and self-esteem into thinking so highly of yourself that you put yourself on a pedestal. In contrast, people who have healthy confidence and self-esteem don't value themselves more than they value others.**

**When you have narcissistic personality disorder, you may come across as conceited, boastful or pretentious. You often monopolize conversations. You may belittle or look down on people you perceive as inferior. You may have a sense of entitlement. And when you don't receive the special treatment to which you feel entitled, you may become very impatient or angry. You may also seek out others you think have the same special talents, power and qualities — people you see as equals. You may insist on having "the best" of everything — the best car, athletic club, medical care or social circles, for instance.**

**But underneath all this grandiosity often lies a very fragile self-esteem. You have trouble handling anything that may be perceived as criticism. You may have a sense of secret shame and humiliation. And in order to make yourself feel better, you may react with rage or contempt and efforts to belittle the other person to make yourself appear better.**

## **WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE**

**When you have narcissistic personality disorder, you may not want to think that anything could be wrong — doing so wouldn't fit with your self-image of power and perfection. But by definition, narcissistic personality disorder causes problems in many areas of your life, such as relationships, work, school or your financial affairs. You may be generally unhappy and confused by a mix of seemingly contradictory emotions. Others may not enjoy being around you, and you may find your relationships unfulfilling. If you notice any of these problems in your life, consider reaching out to a trusted health care provider or mental health provider. Getting the right treatment can help make your life more rewarding and enjoyable.**

## **TESTS AND DIAGNOSIS**

**Narcissistic personality disorder is diagnosed based on signs and symptoms, as well as a thorough psychological evaluation. Your doctor or mental health provider will ask you to describe the signs and symptoms you're experiencing — what they are, when they occur, how intense they are and how long they last, for example. You also might discuss how your life is affected or limited by your symptoms. And you may be asked to fill out psychological evaluations or questionnaires.**

**Although there's no laboratory test to diagnose narcissistic personality disorder, you may also have a physical exam to make sure you don't have a physical problem causing your symptoms.**

**Some features of narcissistic personality disorder are similar to those of other personality disorders. Your mental health provider will take care to make sure you get the proper diagnosis. It's possible to be diagnosed with more than one personality disorder at the same time.**

**To be diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, you must meet criteria spelled out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This manual is published by the American Psychiatric Association and is used by mental health providers to diagnose mental conditions and by insurance companies to reimburse for treatment.**

### **CRITERIA FOR NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER TO BE DIAGNOSED INCLUDE:**

- ♦ **Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance**
- ♦ **Being preoccupied with fantasies about success, power or beauty**
- ♦ **Believing that you are special and can associate only with equally special people**
- ♦ **Requiring constant admiration**
- ♦ **Having a sense of entitlement**
- ♦ **Taking advantage of others**
- ♦ **Inability to recognize needs and feelings of others**
- ♦ **Being envious of others**
- ♦ **Behaving in an arrogant or haughty manner**